February 2, 1986, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled...' and they said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'"

Scripture
Psalm 71:1-6
Luke 4:21-30

Today, throughout the country, services of worship will rightfully acknowledge the tragedy of the Space Shuttle Challenger last Tuesday.

It was a national tragedy because it was so visible. It was national because those who died in a sense were there for us: exploring, pioneering for country and for humankind. And it was national because in many ways they represent us at our best - the way we like to think of ourselves...inclusive, men and women, ethnically religiously mixed, married, parents, singles... As they walked jauntily, confidently to their spacecraft, they represented, for me, the best of our nation, and the best hope of humankind to live, somehow, in the future.

And so we are stunned by what happened. And we feel deeply our common, fragile humanity. And we hurt profoundly for their dear ones. Are there meanings here? May we presume gifts even? God did not intend that. God always weeps when people suffer and die. But we do believe the God of love can use even our tragedies for his purposes. And so in the midst of our tears we did learn, again...about the fragility of our humanity...and the finiteness of even our best technology...and we learned again that even our most sophisticated machines will not ultimately save us and in fact have always the capability to destroy us.

We learned that we are still pioneers - that it is still dangerous out there - and that the best of us will always know intuitively that to live we must go on. We learned as well the meaning of life lived intentionally for noble purposes. Of all the thousands and thousands of words written and spoken, none, I thought, were more elequent than Mike Royko's -

> "I've known so many people, and you probably have, too, who have quietly slipped away from lives of frustration, drudgery, failure, disappointment and sickness. People who never had a chance to climb the mountains of their souls."

Please join me in a moment of prayer. In death as in life, God of the creation, you are sovereign. So we pray, in full confidence of your love for those seven men and women...

We pray for their loved ones. Stand with them. Help them one day to know and rejoice in the selflessness, the excellence, the dedication of their dear ones. We pray for our country. Continue to call our best out of us. Remind us of the dangers ahead. Teach us always that your image is in us - all of us: that your intent is a human family living in peace. In your sovereignty, Lord God, use even this tragedy, to help us - all of us - become more fully your children, more intentionally brothers and sisters to all your people through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

2/2/86

The situation is timeless. A young person leaves home to become what he or she must become. And then the young person returns as that new individual, educated, polished, informed, opinionated: and the people at home look at each other and smile knowingly and say: "Why that's just Joseph and Mary's son."

The sequence reminded me of how difficult it is for a young minister to return to his or her home church and preach a sermon. It's not the preaching that's hard. It's the matter of being taken seriously. People say, "Why that's Bob and Blanche's son...that's Fred and Betty's daughter."

Will Campbell, in his wonderful book, Brother to a Dragonfly, tells about Youth Sunday in his rural Southern Baptist Church. He was chosen to deliver the sermon.

"The sermon was called, 'In the Beginning'...It was, in many ways, heretical and modernistic for East Fork. But on that occasion I could have denounced Christianity as a capitalist myth cunningly designed to keep the masses under control, our youth choir could have sung Ukrainian folk songs, and our Sunday School superintendent could have lectured on 'The Origin of the Species' and all the people would have said 'Amen.' Never had they been so proud of us." (p.77)

That, of course, was a young boy, sixteen. When a young man comes home, people react differently. Jesus returned to Nazareth one time, his home, and went to the Synagogue. He saw relatives there and old friends. He had been teaching in the synagogues of Galilee and had earned a bit of a reputation. And so when he showed up at his home Synagogue the Elders invited him to do the reading for the day and to say a few words. We can almost feel their pride...

He read from Isaiah 61...

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has annointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

That may have been their favorite passage of scripture. It had been a century since Roman occupation and oppression had begun. Messianic expectation ran high. The people of Nazareth read themselves into those

favorite words of the prophet. They were the poor, the oppressed, the captives. That passage represented the promised Messiah speaking a word of hope to them. And so when he slowly rolled up the scroll and sat down in the teaching posture of a rabbi and said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," his listeners surely gasped in astonishment: "That's just Joseph's son!"

And then he made matters even more volatile by proceeding to talk about inclusiveness. That was, and is, a tender nerve. The hope for a Messiah had always been expressed in a tension between the exclusiveness of a solely Jewish Messiah, restorer of Israel, and the inclusiveness of a Messiah who is Lord of all people. Given a choice between those two, the good folk of Nazareth came down on the side of exclusiveness and parochialism, just as Christians do when they consign to hell everyone but members of their particular tribe. And when Jesus told two brief stories, in each of which, the point is that a gentile is favored, his old friends and neighbors became a lynch mob which actually started out to throw him over a cliff.

It's infuriating when a young man or woman returns home and tells the home folk that they are provincial and need to broaden their horizons; It is even more infuriating when the young person catches them in that very human tendency to admire abstractions and resist, with every strength, getting down to particulars. That is the deeper meaning of what is happending here. It is the dynamic that will happen over and over again in the brief three year ministry of Jesus until people can bear it no longer and they crucify him. They had hoped for a Messiah, a Savior, a redeemer, for centuries.

They thrilled to the prophetic images of Isaiah so long as they remained abstractions. But the particularity: Joseph's son - Jesus, set off an angry and suprising violent response.

Professor William Muehl of Yale Divinity School tells a wonderful story about visiting a colonial house near New Haven. History was in every room and the experience was enhanced by his guide, an elderly woman who was the last surviving descendant of the original occupant.

Dr. Muehl noticed a particularly striking musket hanging over the mantel. When he reached to touch it the woman stopped him. "It's loaded" she said. She explained that her great-great-great grandfather had placed the loaded gun there for the day he could use it in the cause of liberty. Muehl asked if he had died before 1776 and missed his opportunity. "No," she said. "He lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817. He just never seemed to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington's revolt."

What happened, William Muehl deduced, is that the particular didn't live up to the abstraction. The man was enthalled with the ideology of freedom and revolution in the abstract. And when his farmer neighbors pounded on his door one April morning and shouted, "There's a scrap over at Concord. Get your Gun!" He didn't do it. (All the Damned Angels, p. 52-53)

Who doesn't know about that, or some variation of it? Abstractions are inspiring. Particulars put us off...

We found it possible for decades to affirm the abstraction of "liberty and justice for all" and to resist with vehemence the particularities of voting rights and equal access and equal opportunity.

More personally, no one disagrees with the idea of a society free from racism, but who hasn't missed the actuality, the particularity in an ethnic slur in the barber shop?

Everyone is for economic justice in the abstract, but the particularity of pay scales for one's own employees can be a touchy subject.

Who isn't inspired by the promise, in the abstract, of a joyful, romantic, life-giving relationship? Who can avoid the popularized abstractions of human relationships in the media, television situation comedies, or commercials? Just read the covers of the papers, books and magazines on the rack while you're unloading your grocery cart at the check-out counter. The particularity, however, is that person, that man or woman whose specificity, foibles, frailities, irritating quirks, and unwillingness to put the toothpaste back where it belongs - whose particularity is always in striking contrast to the abstraction which inspires us.

And so, in matters of faith it seems inherent to stay with the safety of abstraction and avoid the particulars: to keep it all at a distance, academic, unattached, cordoned off from the human particulars of my life. It is the greatest heresy of all time and it sometimes masquarades in the very respectable guise of civility: "religion and politics don't mix after all ... or economics, or how I vote, or my world view, or my opinions, or my leisure. Religion is my private affair: religion is what I do with my quiet moments" all of which means that I prefer my faith in the abstract.

Will Herberg wrote a classic study on American Religion back in the fifties in which he revealed the irony that Americans were becoming more religious and more secular simultaneously. Herberg found that while people were purchasing the Bible in unprescedented numbers, 53% could not name one of the four Gospels... and that when thirty outstanding Americans were asked to name the 100 most important dates in history, the birth and/or Crucifixion of Jesus came in fourteenth, tied with the discovery of X-Ray, and the Wright Brothers first flight... American religion, Herberg concluded, is "Religion in General." (See Catholic, Protestant, Jew)

There is, therefore, constant and understandable pressure in Christian faith to remain abstract: to deal in the coin of vague emotionalism or dry intellectualism. To confine Christ to a warm feeling in my heart - or a brilliant idea in my head. In scholarly circles there has always been tension between philosophy and the actualities of history: between the Christ of theolody and Jesus of Nazareth. It was the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche who clammored about the "scandal of particularity" in Christianity. He saw - and continued to be amazed that so many devout Christians refused to see - the scandalous

particularity of Jesus, crucified Jew, as the incarnation of all that is good and beautiful and holy and hopeful. Those ideas - those words - do better as ideas, as abstractions. It's scandalous to propose that they have their reality in the life of this particular man.

We begin, in faith, not with an idea but with a man. It starts for us, not with a thesis that in unknowable infinity there is a source of being, but with a story. Once upon a time a young man walked into a Synogogue in a remote Jewish province in the time of the Roman Empire and announced that God's Kingdom was at hand. Religion for us, at best, is not a debate about the meaning of life, but a celebration and an imitation of a particular life lived one time long ago by a particular man.

"Revelation" we say, with academic propriety, "happens in the context of history," and what we mean is that in the life of Jesus of Nazareth God lived among us. The doctrine of the Incarnation means God getting down to particulars.

Ours is, an "historical religion." Part of what that means is that God's reality is not a set of ideas but a power and a presence in that little chunk of history which is your life.

The scandal and the glory of the Gospel is that God's love for you is particular. It is not a proposal. You are not an abstraction in God's eyes. It is love for you in your particularity.

Our needs, as people, after all, are not ultimately abstract. Our fears, our desires, our drives, our dreams, our loves - are very specific. And in Jesus Christ, God has acted to be with us, to love us, to empower us, to save us there in that particularity.

In Will Campbell's book there is a poignant incident which illustrates... A young black man had died... Campbell and his brother, out of curiosity, went to the wake. He describes the healthy and vocal expressions of grief: they need...

"The mother shouted

'Lord!'

"Those surrounding her picked up with their refrain as in a litany:

'Lord'

'Jesus'

"Now the echo. Softly. 'Jesus'...

'O Jesus, Jesus... bring my baby home'

'Bring 'im home.'"

The author reflects:

"Whether West African or European, Nigerian or Mississippian in origin, they were the pleadings of a -- woman to the son of a Jewish peasant woman to be with her in her travail...

They were Jesus sounds... And they would not soon depart from us." (op. cit. p. 60-62)

The good news is that God's love is for you and me in our particularity. The good news is that we are not abstractions of God: that with all our eccentricities and failings and petty individual weakness - hopes, griefs, dreams - with all our particularity God loves us and wants us as his own.

One of the last public acts of Jesus was in a room with his disciples, and he wanted, I believe, for them to know in a final way that the power of his love for them would continue to be real - so that men and women in all the years and centuries ahead would also know that the power of his love for them is real. And so there were no abstractions around the table of the Last Supper and there are no abstractions at the table of Holy Communion.

Bread - wine - "This is my body - This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me."

Amen.